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Summary record of the 31st meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, 19 November 1997, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Chowdhury ..... (Bangladesh)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Mselle

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The meeting was called to order at 3.20 p.m.

Agenda item 116: proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 (continued) (A/52/6 (Vol. I and II), A/52/7 (Chap. II, Part I-XII) and A/52/16 and Add.1)

1. The Chairman said that a number of delegations had requested the Secretariat to provide written replies to various questions that had been raised during the general discussion of agenda item 116. Those replies had now been circulated to delegations during the informal consultations.

2. Mr. Maddens (Belgium) said that the European Union had not had the opportunity to comment on section 26, Public information, during the section-by-section consideration of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999. Noting that the mandate of the Department of Public Information was to enhance the image of the Organization and promote an informed understanding of its work among the peoples of the world, he said that the European Union was concerned that the Secretariat rarely responded effectively to critics of the United Nations. It also noted that the Secretary-General's reform proposals would have a significant impact on public information activities, and looked forward to receiving the report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) on the implications of those proposals.

3. Ms. Shenwick (United States of America) reminded the Secretariat that her delegation had specifically asked for the Advisory Committee's recommendations to be costed out. Those figures had still not been made available. Her delegation hoped eventually to be in possession of three sets of figures for purposes of comparison: the Secretary-General's proposed budget, the costed-out recommendations of the Advisory Committee on that proposed budget, and a subsequent report by the Secretariat recosting the budget figures and outlining the impact of the recosting.

4. Upon reviewing the Advisory Committee's report, her delegation had concluded that several of the recommendations contained therein had significant financial implications over and above the Secretary-General's proposed budget level. At the same time the Chairman of the Advisory Committee had said it was unlikely that the Committee would recommend a budget level higher than the Secretary-General's estimates. Those two positions appeared to be contradictory. If the Advisory Committee's recommendations did in fact have a financial impact on the overall level of the budget, it was the understanding of her delegation that the additional expenditure would have to be absorbed within the level of the Secretary-General's proposed budget. Furthermore, if the Advisory Committee failed to specify ways in which such expenditures could be absorbed, a decision to that effect would have to be made by the Secretary-General. Her delegation wished to avoid a situation in which the level of expenditure once again exceeded the level of assessments. Without more detailed guidance from the Advisory Committee, it was unclear how the Fifth Committee should proceed in its deliberations. Her delegation was also concerned that the Fifth Committee had actually received less information from the Advisory Committee than in previous bienniums.

5. With regard to the issue of gratis personnel, her delegation was expecting to receive three reports: a report on the phase-out of type II gratis personnel, a report on the impact of the phase-out on mandates, and a report on overhead charges.

6. Mr. Sulaiman (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the written replies provided by the Secretariat did not contain answers to his earlier question about the two posts scheduled for abolition in the Decolonization Unit. Nor was there any information concerning the translator posts scheduled for abolition in terms of their number, category and language capability.

7. Ms. Fahmy (Egypt) reminded the Secretariat that her delegation had raised a number of questions under Part IV of the proposed programme budget. Those concerns had not been dealt with in the written replies.

8. Mr. Sial (Pakistan) said that his delegation's specific question about the rental of premises had not been addressed, namely whether space was provided at a standard rate, a variable rate or free of charge. In addition, post reductions and the issue of gratis personnel needed to be considered together. In that connection, paragraph 8 of the note by the Secretariat on measures and proposals for United Nations reform (A/52/584) stated that a report on the phase-out of gratis personnel requested by the General Assembly would be submitted in time for a discussion scheduled for 20 November 1997. His delegation wished to know exactly when and in what forum that discussion was due to take place.

9. Ms. Brennen-Haylock (Bahamas) said that her delegation's earlier question concerning section 7 had received only a partial answer. More background information was required on the focal point for women, and specifically how it had been funded in the past. With regard to section 26, her delegation wished to know the level of resources allocated to the Caribbean radio unit within the Department of Public Information and the current level of resources devoted to United Nations information centres in the Caribbean region.

10. Ms. Buergo-Rodríguez (Cuba) noted that questions on a number of budget sections which her delegation had raised at previous meetings had not been dealt with in the written replies, most notably on the sections dealing with economic issues. Her delegation had highlighted the need to identify resources for activities relating to non-governmental organizations throughout the budget. The Secretariat had indicated the total amount devoted to such activities under section 7, but no mention had been made of the total amounts allocated under other sections. In addition, the Secretariat had failed to provide the requested clarifications on the sections dealing with human rights and internal oversight.

11. With regard to conference services, no information had been provided about the steps taken by the Secretariat to rectify the problems resulting from the application of savings measures in the budget for the biennium 1996-1997, as detailed in the report of the Secretary-General on the impact of approved savings measures on the implementation of mandated programmes and activities (A/C.5/51/53). The written replies flatly contradicted that report by stating that savings measures would have no effect on mandated programmes.

12. Furthermore, her delegation had not received a reply regarding adjustments to posts pursuant to General Assembly resolution 51/243 on gratis personnel. The tables listing the posts proposed for abolition which had been appended to the written replies should be worked into the narrative, thus making it easier to visualize what was being proposed.

13. Finally, her delegation wished to remind the Committee that the budget outline did not impose a ceiling on the total budget figure which the General Assembly would eventually adopt. The most important consideration was that all mandated programmes and activities should be delivered in full.

14. Ms. Peña (Mexico) pointed out that the tables listing the posts proposed for abolition did not mention the justification for the abolitions. In addition, her delegation required clarification on the status of the promised document reviewing section 11B, International Trade Centre (UNCTAD/WTO).

15. Mr. Halbwachs (Controller) said that the information on the Decolonization Unit appeared to have been inadvertently omitted from the written replies. The report on guidelines for the employment of gratis personnel was ready, as was the accompanying statistical information. Good progress had been made in the preparation of the report on the implications of the phase-out of type II gratis personnel, which would be issued the following week. The review of section 11B had proceeded more slowly than expected, but would nevertheless be ready in about a week.

16. Mr. Sulaiman (Syrian Arab Republic) requested the Secretariat to provide a speedy reply to his question regarding translators.

The meeting rose at 4.05 p.m.